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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Iran: Possible Near Term Regional Implications
for the US

As the Iranian crisis unfolds, the US may be forced to take even stronger action against Iran either to obtain the release of the hostages or to retaliate if the Iranians harm the hostages. This short paper is an attempt to examine developing attitudes toward the US-Iran confrontation with a particular view to examining how much real support the US can expect within the region in the event of more forceful US action.

Although there is some ambivalence in Muslim attitudes toward Iran's actions, the continuing impasse between the US and Iran is increasing the likelihood that the majority of the Muslim states will either come to perceive the issue as a conflict between the US and Islam or at minimum, hold the US rather than Iran responsible for achieving a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Although support continues among other Muslim governments for release of the hostages, there are now signs that opposition to the Iranian action is abating.* This trend is partly a reaction to US efforts to put pressure on Iran--particularly implied military threats--and partly due to the prolonged nature of the crisis during which the rights and wrongs of the situation have tended to become blurred amid exchanges of threats and counterthreats.

But more importantly, the trend may be a reaction to Khomeini's skillful orchestration of the alleged threat posed

**In Pakistan, for example, a major newspaper--known to be close to the government--has argued that the US should show restraint and be more understanding of the Iranian revolution.*

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to the Muslim world by the "imperialistic" US and "its ally Israel" and a product of the fear--particularly among Gulf Arabs--that punitive US action against Iran could lead to serious turmoil in other Arab countries and only serve the interests of subversive forces in the region. This trend could well continue if the US is perceived to be overplaying its hand by unnecessarily provoking Khomeini or if the perception grows that the US is preparing to undertake military action against Iran.*

Despite real fears among the Arabian Peninsula states and Iraq of Khomeini's Shiite fanaticism, Khomeini has captured issues--anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, and Islamic resurgence--that have wide appeal within conservative and radical Arab states and within non-Arab Muslim countries. By proclaiming that "confrontation with America is now the main Islamic issue," Khomeini is seeking to shift attention from the hostage issue and to blur the distinction between Shiites and Sunnis to enlist wide Muslim support. The recent events in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and India illustrate the opportunities Khomeini can exploit to trumpet pan-Islamism and to play on latent anti-American sentiment that exists throughout the Near East and South Asia region. As the impasse continues and Khomeini continues to portray the US and Israel as the principal threat to Iran, it will be increasingly difficult for other Muslim governments to be seen supporting the US against an Islamic revolution.

Within the Arab world in particular, there is the danger that Khomeini's extreme stance could provide a measure against which other moderate and radical leaders are judged, at least during the present crisis. Recently, for example, the press in Kuwait has begun to portray Khomeini as a supra-nationalist leader (on the order of Nasser) against Israel--a thesis fueled in part by Israeli Defense Minister Weizman's statement that force is the only alternative available to the US to resolve the Iranian crisis.

The US Embassy in Kuwait also has commented that "among the Arabs there is a strong sense of admiration and support for Khomeini, despite and even because of his anti-American

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excesses." Should such sentiment deepen and a popular perception grow that somehow the US and Israel are conspiring to defeat the Iranian revolution and by extension, weaken the Arabs, it will be increasingly difficult for Arab governments to focus attention on Iran's illegal behavior. Moreover, there will be a strong impulse to link growing hostility to the US posture toward Iran with Arab frustration over the lack of progress on the Palestinian issue.

If a climate is being created in the Muslim world in which support for the US position on Iran is beginning to seriously erode, it is unlikely that any government would be able to go beyond endorsing a continuing restrained, diplomatic effort to secure the release of the US hostages.* There appears to be no prospect that any Arab or other Muslim government in the region could ^{publicly} support American military action against Iran even if all diplomatic means to release the hostages appeared exhausted or if the hostages were harmed. Among the Arabs in particular, concern over the potential danger to their own internal security posed by the passions roused by a US attack on Iran and fear of deviating from the Arab consensus that would quickly emerge against US action would govern the behavior of conservative and radical states alike and it is unlikely that any Iranian provocation would be seen as justifying a US military response.**

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All portions of the memorandum are classified Secret.

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